

Cobra Blue Mustang Strat

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Before she spends a year in the hospital, my older sister Elissa picks up the guitar. She plucks the nylon strings of our father's classical guitar; her left fingers stretching to clamp down on frets across its wide neck. In her teenage hands, the instrument is light fairy music.

Next, Elissa tackles his steel-string acoustic guitar. The strings are so thick and stiff that they slice the tips of her square fingers until they bleed. She makes the steel sing its throaty hum, and its warm sound gives way to callouses. The acoustic guitar rings out like a harvest moon and a sack of nickels. It sounds of a swampy cedar forest.

Eventually, she is allowed to take our father's classical guitar into her bedroom, where she shuts the door to practice. Under the influence of 90s grunge, she learns to yell like Kurt Cobain. She also yodels like Jewel, wailing the singer-songwriter's prescient lyrics about little sisters and addiction that shiver my kid sister spine like a sixth sense.

My sister records her songs on the family boombox. She sends her voice to heaven and hell, singing the lyrics of her music — the hands of a thousand sailors. I press my ear to the wall between our rooms as she strums full chords that rattle and buzz the drywall between us. When she's out, I borrow her homemade tapes and plug them into the cassette player to listen to over and over, rewinding her voice that's twisted up in black tape like a spirit trapped in a box, a sour cherry-and-lilac fragrance bottled in cut glass.

For some reason, her bedroom is the coldest in the house. Like mine, the walls still wear the previous owners' shredded floral wallpaper that our parents haven't bothered to take down despite having moved in years ago. She covers the green, tattered wallpaper with a giant poster of Al Pacino wielding a grenade launcher attached to an assault rifle in Scarface and Polaroids of friends in basements drinking beer and watching mafia movies. Elissa tapes to her bedroom wall ripped-out pages of music and fashion magazines that counter Pacino's ominous grimace like fluffy cumulus clouds. Millennium Courtney Love, all celebratory and cleaned up for Hollywood, struts in angel wings and silk slips on red carpets with comeback kid and face-like-a-daisy Drew Barrymore and an elfin goth Melissa

Auf Der Mer in tow. She pins ads for entry-level luxury brands, like Calvin Klein perfumes and turquoise Bebe dresses, that dangle products we can't afford or find anywhere in or near our small rural town.

From the corner of her chilly bedroom and the depths of our unfinished basement, Elissa strums our father's guitars. The songs hurry out of her. Her creativity is feral and prodigious in the way of wild horses learning to swim between islands of sand. Unlike a prior attempt at playing piano in elementary school, she's enraptured with her instrument. She learns fast and bleeds her voice into the string struck rhythms. She is siren, sailor, ship and all the waves crashing into the song of a teenage girl singing for her life.

Fifteen years later, in the kitchen of her Eastend Toronto apartment, she will tell me not for the first or last time: *At least Dad got me an electric guitar when I got out of the hospital. He must've felt that bad.* A father kicks a daughter in the stomach, and she spends a year in and out of hospitals suffering from internal bleeding, undergoing exploratory surgeries, and weathering the kind of debilitating pain that only morphine can make okay enough to breathe. Afterwards, an electric guitar appears in a house with old peeling floral wallpaper as if music were a spell that could assuage paternal guilt.

Home from the hospital, at last, my sister is taken by our father to Long and McQuade in Brampton to pick out an electric guitar. A Fender Mustang Stratocaster in white and cobra blue. With its thin, needle-sharp strings and a wood body armoured in metal and plastic, the instrument plugs into an amp and unleashes the rage of a girl whose father almost killed her.

Elissa plasters the guitar with raunchy stickers, so it becomes her punk scepter — an oblong alien head, glittery bathroom-sign stick figures, lewd smiley faces, and the logo of the band NOFX emblazon its figure. Meanwhile, growls grow from the basement and shake the house. The electric guitar is both thunder and lightning. The ringing fuzz of the amp and the squeaks from her fingers sliding between power chords puncture the claustrophobic atmosphere of our home, send the cat into hiding, scramble the barometer, alert indifferent neighbours that a teenage riot is brewing.

My sister's song-writing evolves from earthy folk to loud, gritty rock. She covers Hole and PJ Harvey with a vengeance. After surviving the hospital, she hardens and pours her voice of liquid metal into the shape of a shield. Post-operation, post-morphine, post-hospital, she returns home as earth and fire.

She takes a senior guitar class at her Catholic High School, where she is the only girl among a handful of Italian and Polish boys. The guitar boys come over to the basement to jam. It's as though the cast of Friends is descending

upon our dilapidated house — these teenagers look like grownups to me. They're more polite and clean-shaven than Elissa's punk friends from the public high school. The Catholic guitar class boys play in bands, drive cars, date, work at Pizza Hut, Blockbuster, and gas stations. They are 17, 18, 19 — just babies in actuality — but through the prism of my 12-year-old eyes, they have reached the peak of all possible life experiences. What else is there to do beyond hanging with friends in basements? Who could want more than beer and guitars? Their puffy skater shoes line our hallway.

At the high school concert recital, Elissa wears a long Le Château black lace dress, Morticia Addams chic, while the boys don blazers to complement their regular uniforms of white button-ups and black dress slacks. The Catholic guitar boys look like my sister's backing band.

Midway through the concert, Elissa strays from the pack to perform a solo — “Zombie” by The Cranberries on her electric cobra. She has taught herself to sing like she's keening, the vocal mourning ritual performed at Irish wakes. She keens just like the lead singer, Dolores O'Riordan, while she backs herself up on guitar. She attacks the syllables of the lyrics with a Gaelic accent, breaking, curling, and piercing the melody. A gorgeous banshee, she croons and strums heavy grunge chords that knock teachers, priests, students, and parents off flimsy folding chairs. To call her performance haunting is an understatement. Her voice is a primordial poltergeist unearthing cycles of repressed trauma that shaped the breathing patterns of everyone in that room. After her solo, the guitar teacher, a short man with kind eyes and a calm voice, tells the audience that we'll certainly be hearing her beautiful, unforgettable voice on the radio someday.

While my sister sings and plays guitar, I learn a new form of power. I watch her perform, and, as her sound waves ripple through my core, they plant a murmur of epiphany — music is a way to survive. I have witnessed my sister, pale and skeletal from stomach pain, come back from the brink of death to wield her electric cobra blue guitar on stage. Guitar in hand, she is more brash than Al Pacino waving an enormous gun around in *Scarface*. She is hard and soft, like Courtney Love, fluttering between kinderwhore baby-doll dresses and wedding white Versace. When Elissa plays guitar and sings, the audience listens to her screams and snarls and wails and lilt. The music holds her suffering and strength. We listen and hold it, too. In the music, vibrations carry understanding, taking over from the everyday words that fail to acknowledge how a father can break a girl and how a whole town can look away.

One night, I sneak into my sister's bedroom, like I often do, to snoop. I mean to excavate traces of this siren I live alongside. My trespass is rever-

ent and prying. I covet her clothes, so I raid her closet, noting sleeves of lace melted from cigarette burns that match the scars on the inside of her tender forearms. I want to touch her vases of dried roses and baby's breath, to read the crumpled notes from classmates and crushes, dusted with graphite and stuffed inside a cardboard suitcase decorated with plastic stars. I want to find clues to understand her mythology and make sense of this strange and dangerous life we are wrapped up in together. I need to be close to her Ivory soap skin. I wish to bridge the gap the length of a kick between us, to fully know why she feels so far away even though she dreams in the next room over from me.

I'd like to inhale my sister — the scent of her vanilla drugstore perfume, her semisweet voice, the urgent noises her hands make when she strikes the guitar. I want to take a peek at the classical guitar she borrowed from our father. I venture to touch the glossy resin that coats its spruce hourglass shape. It's so shiny — a candied apple I could almost lick — but I don't dare pluck a string. I run my ghost hands over the neck, its mysterious order of knobs that twist its strings in and out of tune. I spy the guitar's open mouth, circled with rosette, from which it bellows.

After gawking at the lustrous instrument, I close the case. There's a stack of papers that fell out when I opened it minutes before, so I haphazardly tuck them back in. I figure they're sheet music or chord charts or something like that. I snap the bronze clasps shut and lock the guitar into its holy cradle.

The screams that boil over in the night teach me those papers were important and not to be messed up. I cower in my twin bed in my tiny room with its ragged strips of purple floral wallpaper that I've yet to conceal with posters of Tori Amos, Tegan and Sara, Ani DiFranco. One day, decades later, my sister will adorn my torn wallpaper with butterfly stickers while she's lying in my childhood twin bed before her death. But for now, I am a kid, and I hear our werewolf father yell at Elissa that those papers inside the classical guitar case shouldn't have been fucked around with, touched, breathed on. What a fucking dimwit bitch. Can't be trusted with nothing. Whack. I'd love to tell you what happens next, but my memory goes ink black.